

M+ St MARY'S CHURCH



Our Values

Studies for personal reflection and home group discussions

Introduction

I hope, like me, you love being part of St Mary's Church and want to see it continue to grow and thrive and reach new generations of Draytonians with the good news of Jesus. So how do we make sure we have the right things in place to help us to do this now and in the future?

Last October, St Mary's were invited by the Diocese to take part in a team coaching programme for market town churches wanting to grow in faith and mission. The training and coaching are delivered by an organisation called Lead Academy and focus on a number of key areas of church life:

- Values & Vision
- Church Structures
- Mission
- Discipleship.

At the Autumn Meeting last year, members of the St Mary's 'Lead Team' shared what we had been learning about the importance of establishing the right values within our church; values that will act as a strong foundation for growth and without which our hopes and best laid plans will come to nothing. These are the characteristics of our church family that will underpin all that we do.

At the Autumn Meeting many of you took part in an exercise to help identify the positive characteristics and values of St Mary's Church, as well as those areas that we find more of a challenge. The 'Lead Team' have prayerfully considered this feedback and used this to articulate the values we feel describe the kind of church we are and want to be.

The following studies are designed to help us explore these values more deeply and think about how we put them into action within the life of our church family. They can be used in conjunction with recordings of a sermon series covering the same Bible readings. These can be found on our YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3RShnzNqIS-bTomDxAxqJA>

I hope you are encouraged, challenged and blessed in equal measure as you take time to read, discuss and pray through these values.

God bless you,

Catherine

OUR VALUES AT ST MARY'S

At St Mary's, individually and as a church family, our aim is to be:

Passionate for God
Outward-looking
Generous
Loving
Welcoming
Courageous

Passionate for God

Way In

What does the phrase 'passionate for God' mean to you? Does it excite you or make you feel uncomfortable? Can you pinpoint why?

Read: Read Romans 12.1-8

Background

If a verse starts 'Therefore' then we should always ask ourselves what the 'therefore' is there for. And this is a pretty big 'therefore' – present yourselves as living sacrifices. It's so big it's as if the whole of Paul's letter so far has been leading to this.

Right near the start of the letter, Paul plants his stake in the ground – 'I am not ashamed of the gospel – it is the power to save everyone who believes' and he goes about explaining why we all – every one of us – needed saving: one day God's righteous judgment and wrath will be revealed. Because although mankind had all kinds of evidence for God's existence and presence in creation, we neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him (1.21).

Talk of God's wrath might seem more suited to the Old Testament, but we need to take it seriously if we are to understand the magnitude of Paul's 'therefore'. God's wrath is not the same as human anger. His wrath is the cataclysmic reaction which occurs when human sin comes in contact with the complete holiness of God. Do we truly comprehend what a life-threatening situation we are in? So how am I saved from that? Amazingly, God provides the only way out. 'But now a righteousness from God has been made known. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe'. (3.21, 22) We have gone from being incompatible with God's holiness, unable to come anywhere near him, to having a relationship of peace with him (5.1), being reconciled with him (5.10), having access to him (5.2), saved – and all that before we did a single thing to deserve it (5.8).

Paul doesn't just write about how we have been saved, but about the consequences of that. He talks about the good news of not having to be trapped or condemned by sin (6.4 and ch 7-8). We have the Spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead living in us (8.11) and through him we know we are God's children (8.16) and nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from his love (8.37-39). We have gone from facing annihilation to being able to be closer to the God who loves us than we could ever possibly imagine. Paul can't contain



himself any longer by the time he gets to the end of Chapter 11, ‘Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.’ (11.33-36). *THEREFORE.....!!!!*

This willingness to submit our whole lives to Jesus is our response to the most incredible, wonderful, underserved gift of God’s forgiveness and grace. It’s a thankfulness and gratitude which spontaneously overflow within us when we fully grasp the extent of God’s love for us and what he has done for us.

...in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices...

Questions

1. How might the idea of being ‘living sacrifices’ reflect being ‘passionate for God’?
2. What is hard about trying to be a ‘living sacrifice’?
3. How important is it for us to have our own stories of God’s mercy and grace at work in our lives, in order for us to respond to God in this way? Do you have a story you are willing to share with others?
4. What kinds of things would you expect to see in your own life and in our church life together if we were really seeking to be living sacrifices?
5. Why do you think being passionate for God is an important value for St Mary’s to aspire to, if we hope to be a thriving church? What would our church look like if we were all ‘passionate for God’?
6. What one thing would you change or to start to put into practice personally in the light of this study?

Other Readings

If you have time you might want to look at some other passages. What do these add to your understanding of what it means to be ‘passionate for God’?

Matthew 6: 33

Jeremiah 42.1-6

John 4.23-24

Outward-looking

Way In

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said "The Church is the only organisation that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it." How has the Church put this into practice throughout the ages? Are there ways in which it has failed to do this?

Read: Read Matthew 5.13-16



Background

Our passage sits near the start of a section of Matthew's gospel known as the Sermon the Mount, where Jesus is teaching his followers. He has started with a series of surprising blessings (beatitudes); surprising because they weren't the usual things people then (or now) thought of as blessings.

Jesus says, when in humility we have an honest opinion of our own shortcomings and don't think of ourselves more highly than we ought – we're blessed. He says that when we are heartbroken at the state of the world – we're blessed. When we try to live a life in line with God's agenda rather than our own – we're blessed. When we long and work for a more just society – we're blessed. Jesus says that when we are merciful, forgiving and compassionate – we're blessed. When we love God completely and wholeheartedly – we're blessed. When we try to bring about reconciliation where it is needed – we're blessed. When we're willing to stand up be counted for our faith, even when it brings insults or ridicule – we're blessed.

I'm sure those listening thought Jesus was mad. How can any of those things be blessings? But in God's kingdom, in God's way of seeing things, these *are* blessings; because when we develop these characteristics then God can really get to work and do all kinds of things, not just within us but through us. Blessed people make a difference. Blessed people are the difference. They are salt and light.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Jesus doesn't seem to say that his followers will have much choice in the matter. He doesn't say, 'You can become salt', or , 'You can choose to be light'. However, what kind of salt and light we are does depend on us. The effectiveness of our saltiness or the penetration of our rays of light can be compromised if we are not careful and the world is depending on us not to keep these to ourselves.

Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus chose the images of salt and light to describe his followers?
2. In what ways does being effective salt and light depend on us being ‘outward-looking’?
3. What are some of the barriers to being salt and light?
4. Can you recall a time when someone was salt or light for you? Are you willing to share your story with others? In what ways were you helped?
5. In what ways are we at St Mary’s salt and light in our community? How would we find out where else our salt and light are needed?
6. What one thing would you change or to start to put into practice personally in the light of this study?

Other Reading

If you have time you might want to look at another passage. What does this add to your understanding of what it means to be outward-looking?

Matthew 28.16-20

Generous

Way In

Jesus told a parable about a rich fool, who built himself bigger and bigger barns to store all his grain and goods, but who wasn't 'rich towards God'. What do you think it means to be 'rich towards God'?

Read: Read 2 Corinthians 8.1-15



Background

Great hardship had struck the early Christian church in Jerusalem. We are not sure of the exact cause of their poverty; it may have been the result of persecution (cf Acts 11.19) and/or the consequence of a bad harvest in the region during the mid AD 40s (Acts 11.27-30). Whatever the cause, it had prompted Paul to take a collection among the churches he visited in Greece on his missionary travels.

Paul uses different words to describe the collection being taken for the Jerusalem church: it is a '*logeria*' ('collection', 1 Corinthians 16.1-2), a '*eulogia*' ('blessing', 2 Corinthians 9.5), a '*leitourgia*' ('service', 2 Corinthians 9.12; Romans 15.27), '*koinonia*' ('fellowship', 'partnership', sharing, Romans 15.26; 2 Corinthians 8.4; 9.13); a '*diakonia*' (a form of 'serving', 'ministry', 2 Corinthians 8.4; 9.1, 12, 13) and most importantly an expression of '*charis*' ('grace' 'gift', 1 Corinthians 16.3; 2 Corinthians 8.1, 4, 6, 7, 9).

In his second letter to the church in affluent Corinth Paul urges them to prepare for his impending visit by completing the collection they had started the year before. To galvanise them he tells them of the example of the Macedonian churches; far, far less well off than the church in Corinth and yet demonstrating great generosity.

For Paul, the Macedonians joyful giving to others, even in the midst of their own poverty and suffering, is a sign of God's grace and stems from them giving themselves first to the Lord. The example of the Macedonians reminds the Corinthians that the reality of their spirituality will be seen in their giving, which will be a test of the genuineness of their faith.

Paul never establishes a standard *for* giving, only the standard *of* giving. Neither is he advocating an abstract moral duty, but a theology—this isn't about being legalistic, this is about their very understanding of their relationship with God. Giving is not a way of earning

- see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

Brownie points with God; it's not showing God how much we can do for him, but a way of showing how much God has done for us.

Questions

1. How might the different ways in which Paul describes this collection reflect the different ways in which we can be generous?
2. The Macedonians generosity derived from the grace God had given them, which resulted in an overflowing joy, which welled up into rich generosity. The progression is from grace to joy to giving. What do we learn from the order of this progression? Would it work the other way round; if not, why not?
3. Paul explains how giving is just as much a spiritual gift of grace as any of the other charismatic gifts the Corinthians had received and prized so highly (1 Corinthians 12. 1-11). How does this influence our understanding of what it means to be a church that is seeking to grow spiritually?
4. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the grace that Jesus has bestowed upon us: 'that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich'. In what way did Jesus exchange riches for poverty? In what ways has he transformed our poverty to riches?
5. In what ways have you seen the 'grace of giving' being put into action in St Mary's? Are there still ways in which we might *excel* in this gift?
6. What one thing would you change or to start to put into practice personally in the light of this study?

Other Reading

If you have time you might want to look at another passage. What does this add to your understanding of what it means to be generous?

Matthew 25: 31-46

Luke 12.13-21

Luke 21.1-4

Loving

Way In

How would you define love?

Read

1 Corinthians 13

Background

This passage from 1 Corinthians has been chosen as the Bible reading at countless weddings and yet it is probably one of the most unromantic descriptions of love we could come across. Paul was definitely not describing romantic love here.

He is writing because the Corinthian Christians are being quite unloving towards one another. There are divisions in the church, with different factions having their 'pet' leaders. Their celebrations of the Lord's Supper have turned into free-for-all's, with the 'haves' lording it over the 'have-nots' and they have succumbed to spiritual one-upmanship, with certain gifts of the Spirit being more highly valued than others.

So, if it is spiritual excellence they crave, then Paul is going to show them the most excellent way. Without love all of these charismatic gifts of tongues, prophesy, knowledge or faith are nothing. The right way to exercise all spiritual gifts is the way of love. When we see God face to face, there will be no need for many of the gifts of the Spirit, but three will remain: faith, hope and love—but the greatest of these is love.

The Greeks had no fewer than seven words for love: *eros* (sexual passion), *philia* (deep friendship), *storge* (familial love), *ludus* (playful love), *pragma* (longstanding, practical love), *philautia* (love for oneself) and *agape*. It is the last of these, *agape*, that Paul uses here. *Agape* is a selfless, sacrificial, other-focussed love.

This is a love that is concerned for the welfare of those around us, regardless of any quality of 'loveableness' of their part. It is a kind of love which became synonymous with the Christian community and didn't go unnoticed, causing others to say in amazement "See how they love one another." (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*).



And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Questions

1. In what ways is the love Paul describes different from romantic love?
2. In 1 John 4.16 we read that ‘God is love’. In what ways does God embody the kind of love Paul describes? How is this the motivation for our love for others?
3. Why is love so important as the foundation for all the other spiritual gifts? Why is it important that it is included amongst the values we want to aspire to at St Mary’s?
4. This kind of love has little to do with ‘feelings’ and everything to do with the choices we make about how we treat others. Which elements of this kind of love do you find most difficult to put into practice?
5. Do you think that others look at St Mary’s and say “See how they love one another?” How is this love demonstrated? What would cause them to say “See how they love us?”
6. What one thing would you change or start to put into practice personally in the light of this study?

Other Readings

If you have time you might want to look at some other passages. What do these add to your understanding of what it means to be loving?

Ephesians 4.17-32

Galatians 5:16-26

Welcoming

Way In

Is there a difference between being a friendly church and a church where people can find friends? Which kind of church is St Mary's?

Read: Genesis 18.1-16

Background

Although this narrative passage is not a set of instructions or commands it is a wonderful story full of lessons about hospitality and welcome.

The three men who approach Abraham's camp are very special visitors indeed. In verse 10, one of them predicts that in a year's time he will return and Sarah will have had the much longed-for son that she and Abraham had been promised by God. The one who predicts this is referred to as 'the LORD' and when we see 'LORD' written in capital letters in the Old Testament we know that this is none other than Yahweh, the great 'I AM' himself. As we read on, we discover that the other two 'men' are angels.

Abraham, however, doesn't realise all this at first and so his ready welcome and diligence as a host is simply the least he would do for any visitor and he is doubly blessed in return.

Everything in Abraham's treatment of his visitors and his attitude towards them speaks of the great tradition of hospitality in the Near-East, but it is every bit as relevant to us here in Market Drayton today.



- he hurried from the entrance to his tent to meet them.

Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you have been made to feel really welcome? What was it *specifically* that made you feel welcome?
2. What lessons for welcome do we learn from how Abraham greets his visitors?

3. In what ways might people need refreshment and rest when they come to St Mary's?
4. As well as being hospitable in a very practical way, what is it about Abraham's attitude that is so welcoming?
5. In what ways might we be blessed unexpectedly by being a church that practices generous hospitality and welcome?
6. What one thing would you change or start to put into practice personally in the light of this study?

Other Readings

If you have time you might want to look at some other passages. What do these add to your understanding of what it means to be welcoming?

Psalm 68.4-6a

Galatians 3: 26-29

Courageous

Way In

What's the difference between being courageous and being reckless or foolhardy?

Read: Joshua 1.1-11

Background

The Israelites had wandered in the wilderness of Sinai since God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, under the leadership of Moses. God had been with them and provided for them throughout this time, despite their grumbling! God had promised them the land of Canaan, where their ancestor Abraham had settled previously. When they arrive at the borders, God instructs Moses to send some men ahead to explore the land. Joshua is one of these men. They return with stories of a land 'flowing with milk and honey', but also inhabited by powerful people in heavily fortified cities (Numbers 13). Some of the men put fear into the hearts of the Israelites by describing them as giants and themselves as grasshoppers in comparison. It is only Joshua and Caleb who are convinced that the LORD will be with them and encourage the people not to be afraid (Numbers 14.5-9). But the people refuse to believe them and as a result their wanderings in the desert are extended to 40 years! Many of them will not now enter the land God had promised them, including Moses.

At the end of his life, Moses passes the leadership baton on to Joshua. The task of finally leading God's people across the Jordan and into Canaan will rest with him and Moses now encourages him, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31.6).

We should pause whilst thinking about Joshua's courage to acknowledge that stories of God commanding the Israelites to take possession of the Promised Land, destroying the cities that are already there, along with the people in them, don't sit very easily with many and nor should they. We can't be meant to accept too easily the apparent genocide of the tribes who already inhabited the land, just because God commanded it. There would be something very wrong if that didn't make us feel very uncomfortable.



Be strong
and courageous...
for the LORD your
God will be with
you wherever
you go.

Unfortunately there is no easy, straight-forward answer to this unsettling scenario; but there are some things to bear in mind.

Many ancient accounts—usually written by the victors—describe battles as being complete annihilations against impossible odds, reflecting the hyperbole favoured in the writings of these cultures. We have to recognise that the histories of Israel are written in this style of writing. Victorious they certainly were, but it is obvious from later references that people from some of these Canaanite tribes are still living in the land after the Israelites take possession.

All that, of course, doesn't negate the fact that scripture records God directing Israel to take possession of the land, killing others along the way. But he doesn't write them a blank cheque and we get no sense that God himself takes the remotest satisfaction in any of this. This is not a case of God condoning this kind of destruction, nor can it be used as justification for when we humans have perpetrated such violence.

We need to remember that God isn't giving Israel this land as some sort of reward. God needs his people in their own land and one which is free (as far as possible) from the influences of other spiritual powers, in order that they might become a blessing to *all* the nations and be the people through whom he would eventually reveal himself as the Messiah who would redeem and save us. Do we truly appreciate the scale of our need of a rescue? How great is the sin of humankind and how great the peril to the human soul that God has to take this kind of action to achieve his rescue?

Ultimately, when God does reveal himself, we discover in Jesus the God who would rather submit to violence than commit it.

What we can take from the story of Joshua is someone who is willing to take God at his word and who is willing to step out in faith and obedience and, yes, courage.

Questions

1. Why is it so easy to get *discouraged*? How do we combat this?

2. What were the main reasons that the Israelites could take courage? How would this have made all the difference? How might St Mary's take courage for the same reasons?

3. In what ways did Joshua prepare for entering the land? What part does preparation have in helping us have courage?
4. What other stipulations did God give to Joshua and how would these have helped the Israelites to have courage? What would this mean for us here at St Mary's?
5. Read Joshua 3. Here we read of the Israelites crossing the River Jordan as they enter the Promised Land. What things might we learn from this passage about what is needed when we step out in courage and faith for God?
6. What one thing would you change or to start to put into practice personally in the light of this study?

Other Readings

If you have time you might want to look at some other passages. What do these add to your understanding of what it means to be courageous?

2 Timothy 1.6-7

2 Corinthians 5.6-10

Psalm 31.9-24

Bringing it all together...

Having spent time considering each of our church values, here are some further questions to think about. If you have been doing these studies as part of a group you might want to devote a final session to discussing these questions.

1. Thinking about all of these values together, in what ways do they relate to each other?
2. Having considered each of these values, which do you find the most challenging personally? Which do you think will be the most challenging for us as a church? Why do you think this is?
3. How will you be seeking to live out these values in your own life?
4. How will these values act as a foundation for growth and mission at St Mary's?
5. Having had a sermon series and these Bible studies, in what other ways could we communicate and embed these values in the culture of St Mary's?